DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 870 CS 504 824

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TITLE Media Panel. Project No. 6326.
INSTITUTION National Swedish Board of Education, Stockholm.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 17p.; For related documents, see ED 172 775 and ED 172 781.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT School Research Newsletter; 1984:9 Nov 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; *Behavior Patterns; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Influences; Longitudinal Studies; *Mass Media; *Mass Media Effects; *Media Research; Music; Sex Differences; *Television Viewing; Videotape Cassettes
IDENTIFIERS *Media Use; Sweden

ABSTRACT

The Swedish Media Panel is a research program about children and young persons and their use of mass media. The aim of the ten-year (1975-1985) project is to explain how media habits originate, how they change as children grow older, what factors on the part of children themselves and in their surroundings may be connected with a certain use of the media and, finally, what consequences this may have. The main emphasis of the program is on television, but the use of radio, film, music, books, and the daily and weekly press is also studied. Data collected thus far (1976, 1978, 1980, and 1984) from 1,750 school children have indicated the following: (1) it is becoming more common for Swedish children to start watching television when they are three years old, with viewing slowly increasing until it peaks at upwards of two hours a day between the ages of 10 and 12; (2) boys invariably spend more time in front of television then girls; (3) television is the dominant mass medium where younger children are concerned; (4) at age 15 or 16 children watch less television than at any other period of life, turning from television to music of various kinds; (5) students prefer to use video recorders to play back rented cassettes; (6) the more time parents spend watching television, the more time children spend doing the same; and (7) children who are heavy television consumers tend more than others to be regarded as disruptive. (HOD)

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SKOLÖVERSTYRELSEN
NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION, SWEDEN

SCHOOL RESEARCH Newsletter

ED254870

NOVEMBER 1984

SUBJECT
Children
Young persons
Mass media

1984:9

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Current project

TITLE OF PROJECT: MEDIA PANEL

It is sometimes said that we know disturbingly little about the way in which mass media influence society, ourselves and our children. And yet consumption of mass media is the biggest leisure occupation in Sweden. Our children, not least, are exposed to mass media several hours every day. What effect does this have on them? How do individuals utilise media? How does media utilisation change with advancing age?

These are some of the pivotal questions which a number of researchers are trying to answer within the MEDIA PANEL research programme.

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PROJECT NO.
6326

CS SOH 824

Published by National Board of Education in Sweden, Department for Coordination and Planning, Information and Documentation Section, S-106 42 Stockholm, Sweden. Telephone: +46 8 14 06 60.
Responsible Editor: Inger Marklund. Editor: Mona-Britt Hanse.
ISSN 0345-5343

Background

Society has been drastically transformed in the past 150 years. Traditional lifestyles have given way to the differentiated, specialist society of today. At the same time, the emphasis in communication between individuals has shifted from the direct to the indirect. Modern society is very much a mass media society. Next to employment and sleep, the adult Swede devotes most of his time to mass media. Average exposure to different kinds of media - television, radio, newspapers, weeklies, specialised journals, video, the cinema, phonograms etc. - is about 5 hours per individual per day.

Children and young persons constitute a particularly important group in this connection. The impressions which children gain - starting at an early age - from mass media are presumed to have a powerful impact on the way in which they view themselves, Swedish society and the world at large. The average 15-year-old has spent almost as much time in front of the television as he has spent at school. And the time devoted by him to all mass media combined is a good deal more than that.

In the old "face-to-face" society, children had the opportunity of associating with both neighbours and relatives, other children and adults, and with individuals both older and younger than themselves. This resulted in close links not only between generations but also between different people. In the village community, children had an opportunity of naturally acclimatising to their adult roles. In present-day society, children and young persons are of little importance and, consequently, are often relegated to obscurity. They are almost completely isolated from working life and contacts between generations and individuals have been impeded. The transition from village community to a differentiated, industrialised society has created conditions which can often make children feel less secure and more uncertain of themselves. Children today often have difficulty in satisfying more or less fundamental needs. Many people believe that television in our society is a substitute for a great many of the functions which in pre-industrial society belonged to the company of relatives and other villagers. This, presumably, accounts for a great

deal of the popularity of television. The medium satisfies a number of fundamental needs on the part of children and young persons.

In order, therefore, to arrive at a better understanding of how children and young persons utilise mass media, why they use mass media in a particular way and what consequences this has, one has to study the child in the whole of its social situation. The utilisation of media by children and young persons must be placed in its proper context by considering their relations to the family, contemporaries, school etc. Children are not just passive users of media, they are often active in their choice of media and in their utilisation of media of different kinds. In order, therefore, to understand the potential impact of mass media on children, we have to understand what children themselves want to get out of media. Research into these questions has attracted growing interest in recent years, and the Media Panel research programme is a case in point.

Strategy and purpose

The Media Panel is a research programme about children and young persons and their use of mass media. The aim of the project is to explain how media habits originate, how they change as children grow older, what factors on the part of children themselves and in their surroundings may be connected with a certain utilisation of media and, finally, what consequences this may have. The main emphasis has been on television, but the use of radio, film, music, books and the daily and weekly press has also been studied. Since 1980 the programme has also included the use of video by children.

The project is being jointly conducted by the Department of Sociology at the University of Lund and the Information Technology Department of Växjö College, and it has been successfully financed by the Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund and, since autumn 1983, the National Board of Education.

The Media Panel comprises two panels, viz schoolchildren in Malmö (the pre-school panel) and schoolchildren in Växjö (the compulsory school panel). The pre-school panel originally comprised a statistical sample of about 250 Malmö children and their mothers. The children were all born in 1969 and enrolled in municipal pre-school institutions in Malmö in autumn 1975. Data concerning these children were collected on four occasions: in 1975, when they were attending pre-school, in 1979 (grade 3 of compulsory school), in 1981 (grade 5) and in 1984 (grade 8). The fifth and final collection of data is planned for 1985 (grade 9).

The compulsory school panel comprises a total of 1,500 Växjö pupils in grades 5, 7 and 9 of compulsory school, together with their parents. Data have so far been collected on four occasions, viz autumn 1976, 1978 and 1980 and spring 1984. A final collection of data is planned for spring 1985.

The project has been receiving financial support from the NBE since autumn 1983, and this has made it possible for us to continue expanding the panel of children born in 1969, which is operating parallel to the pre-school panel. These pupils first took part in the project in 1978, when they were in grade 3 of compulsory school, and then again in 1980, when they were in grade 5, and it is they who are now being followed up in the 1984 and 1985 collections of data.

The project timetable is as follows.

DATA COLLECTION YEARS AND SCHOOL GRADES

	Born	1975	1976	1978/79	1980/81	1984	1985	No.
	1961	-	9	-	-	-	-	250
	1963	-	7	9	-	-	-	250
Växjö	1965	-	5	7	9	-	-	500
	1967	-	-	5	7	-	-	250
	1969	-	-	3	5	8	9	250
Malmö	1969	Pre-school	-	3	5	8	9	250

Thus, as far as the Växjö part of the study is concerned, two complete panels have been established, the first of which comprises 500 pupils born in 1965 and interviewed in 1976, 1978 and 1980 (grades 5, 7 and 9 respectively), while the second comprises pupils born in 1969 and interviewed in 1978, 1980 and 1984 (grades 3, 5 and 8 respectively). We shall be returning to these pupils in grade 9 in 1985.

This strategy enables us to trace the development of the children's mass media habits from pre-school throughout compulsory school, i.e. from age 6 to about 16. Media habits in a big city (Malmö) can be compared with media habits in a medium sized town (Växjö). We will also have a chance of seeing the extent to which media habits change with the passing of time, e.g. by comparing 16-year-olds in 1976 with 16-year-olds in 1985.

Research concerning mass media and their audiences is customarily said to have been of two kinds. One approach is that of effect research, which is concerned with various consequences of mass media, e.g. whether television viewing creates aggression, what sort of knowledge television conveys and so on. Another approach is concerned with the way in which the recipient uses mass media, what benefit he feels that he derives from reading, viewing and listening, and what functions mass media can be said to perform in the lives of different people. This approach we usually term utilisation research. In the Media Panel research programme, an effort is being made to combine these two research traditions. The main emphasis of our inquiry is on theoretical and methodological primary research. At the same time we have gained access to empirical data, abundant information concerning the way in which Swedish schoolchildren use mass media, their attitude towards their families, contemporaries and school, and their view of themselves and society at large.

We are quite well informed about such things as the amount of time which children of different ages spend watching TV, what they like watching, their viewing hours and so on, but we know far too little about the reasons why children have different media habits and about the effects of mass media on society, ourselves and our children. This

is why empirical and theoretical research into mass media is so important. Where media and young persons are concerned, teachers, parents, politicians and mass media specialists require this knowledge so that all of us, in our various fields, will be able to reach a standpoint on the subject of mass media.

In the Media Panel research programme we wish to compile data on which to base standpoints of this kind, while at the same time contributing towards the progress of research and the improvement of its methods. The questions we raise cover a very wide spectrum. They are concerned, for example, with the way in which young persons identify with what they see on television, why they watch television and how dependent on television they feel themselves to be. We also ask what alternative activities they take part in and how much time they spend with their families and friends. We are also interested in their opinions about and satisfaction with school, their views concerning the world at large and their impressions of Sweden. Finally, we inquire about their future vocational plans and expectations, since we believe that mass media can be influential in these contexts.

The Media Panel is now entering its final phase. Four doctoral theses and a large number of reports have been published. Another three doctoral theses are in preparation, as is the final report on the project.

The following pages are concerned with some of the Media Panel's results, together with a general discussion of media use, its causes and effects.

Children and mass media

It is becoming more common for Swedish children to start watching television when they are three years old. At that age they spend an average of 30 minutes per day viewing. Viewing then slowly increases until it peaks at upwards of 2 hours per day between the ages of 10 and 12. Up to the age of 8, most children concentrate on children's programmes, but a distinct change occurs in this respect during the

early school years. During their final year at junior level (age 10), the great majority of children nominate an adult programme as their firm favourite.

Boys invariably spend more time in front of the television than girls, and children of poorly educated mothers are more assiduous viewers than children whose mothers are well educated. The results also indicate that emotionally disturbed children are already heavy television consumers at age 6 and that continuing heavy consumption during their school years has the effect of aggravating their problems. The panel survey has thus given us an opportunity of demonstrating a clear interaction between children's viewing and their emotional adjustment.

Television is the dominant mass media where younger children are concerned, though they also listen to the radio and read comics, weeklies and books. The first two of these activities are commonest among boys, while the last two are commonest among girls.

Children watch more television between the ages of 10 and 12 than at any other time in their lives (possibly with the exception of certain retired categories). Television is unquestionably the most important medium to children of this age. At age 15 or 16, on the other hand, children watch less television than at any other period of life. They turn from television to music of various kinds, listened to through various media (tape recorders, record players and the radio). Swedish teenagers spend more time listening to music than watching television, partly because music is a social medium while television is primarily a family medium. Young persons have far more control over music than over television. In fact they enjoy almost complete liberty in determining both time, place and content. Where television is concerned, they can decide none of these things.

This change in young people's mass media habits is the most drastic change occurring at any time in their lives. This is most clearly apparent from the transition from television to music of various kinds, but it applies to all media, viz books, newspapers, weeklies and magazines and the cinema. Very simply, children can be said to turn

away from family-oriented to socially oriented mass media. They consistently prefer media which in various ways are beyond the family's control. Teenagers turn away from the family to the circle of their friends, and the same goes for their mass media habits.

The dissemination of video in the early eighties is part of the same pattern. Video can be used in two ways: for time-shifting, i.e. recording television programmes for later viewing, and for playing back hired cassettes. Our youngsters particularly prefer the latter use. On weekday afternoons and on weekend evenings when their parents were out, video made it possible for them to use the television set in the company of their friends and without any interference by adults. Sweden today has one of the world's highest video ownership ratios, and it is above all families with children that purchase this type of equipment. Sixty per cent of all children aged between 3 and 8 have seen video at some time or another, and the figure for older children and youngsters is higher still. Just as with television, boys spend more time viewing that girls and children of undereducated parents more than other children.

The use made of mass media by children and young persons is in fact very dependent on the social position of the family and the situation of the individual child. The social status, educational background, income etc. of parents naturally do a great deal to influence children's mass media habits. A check for these background factors clearly reveals the influence of parental viewing habits. The more time parents spend watching television, the more time children spend doing the same. Parents, for good or ill, serve as models to their children. (No instance has been found of the reverse, i.e. of children and young persons influencing the amount of time their parents spend viewing.)

Children's own social situation also interacts with their use of mass media. Data have shown that children who are negative about school spend more time on video and prefer different types of music than children who are happy at school. Children who are heavy television consumers tend more than others to be regarded as disruptive and scatterbrained. There is usually a process of interaction involved

here between adjustment and children's and young persons' use of mass media.

Sometimes one wonders what children, and for that matter adults, got up to before mass media existed. A recent survey in the Faeroes showed that social intercourse with other children was the main victim when television was introduced there as recently as 1979. The children themselves also described how relations in the home had been influenced by the medium; people no longer had time to talk to each other as they had had before. When, in connection with the Media Panel, Swedish youngsters were interviewed about their experiences of the television strike in the spring of 1980, it transpired that they too appreciated having more time to spare for associating with their friends and doing their homework. Other Media Panel data, however, revealed that there are many children who, in spite of being avid television viewers, have time to spare both for friends and other leisure activities. Between the ages of 10 and 12, assiduous viewing confers a certain amount of status among one's friends.

Television and video are said to impair reading ability and to detract from interest in reading. A supporting argument here is that television, unlike school, makes no demands on the individual, whereas reading involves effort. To many children, the argument goes, books are now something to be read by compulsion, not choice.

Probably the main reason why television has been able to compete so effectively above all with reading is that it satisfies the same needs, i.e. the need for excitement, entertainment and relaxation, while at the same time demanding the minimum of effort. Thus it would seem as though television viewing has had a negative impact on the reading habits of some children and youngsters. But there are Swedish data showing that certain groups are heavy consumers of the more accessible media - television, radio and the tape recorder - but at the same time get in a great deal of reading. Perhaps the truth is that the children and young persons who, say, spend a lot of time watching television and do little reading would still have done no reading if there had been no

television. If so, the medium supplies them with knowledge which they would otherwise have had no chance of obtaining.

The general discussion of the effects of television and, nowadays, video as well, has frequently been dominated by the negative effects of fictionalised violence. Our survey findings indicate that children are to a very great extent frightened by the things they have seen on television or video.

Unquestionably, however, children and young persons learn a great deal from watching television and video. These media supply them with knowledge which neither schools nor their families have any possibility of conveying. As was claimed by way of introduction, television also provides children and young persons with an insight into adult social and working life from which they are to a great extent excluded in modern society. In addition, of course, these media give children and young persons an opportunity for entertainment and relaxation.

Television, then, has both positive and negative effects on our children and youngsters, and this is an important point to bear in mind. It is also important to remember that the causal connection between television and children's lives is not one-way traffic. Television doubtless has a whole variety of effects on children and young persons, but it is equally certain that children and youngsters use television, video and other mass media in pursuance of their own more or less conscious ends. This being so, mass media utilisation becomes a consequence, an effect, rather than a cause. Causal relations very often exist in both directions, and this is undoubtedly so not least where relations between school and mass media are concerned.

It is a mistake, then, and one often committed in the course of debate, to single out TV or video as the villain of the piece when things go wrong at school or in the family. Often one can just as well say that when things go wrong in the family or at school, children take refuge in video and other media, turning away from school and family to a socially oriented use of mass media. This in turn can accentuate their negative attitude towards the family and school. The transformation of

mass media habits which takes place in the early teens can, for example, be interpreted as this type of continuing interaction between the individual, the family, the social group, the school and the mass media. Within the Media Panel, we have been able to show how poor achievement at school, as well as attitudes towards school, the family and contemporaries, influences mass media utilisation, not least where video viewing and tastes in music are concerned. It is also important to bear in mind that the use of mass media by children and young persons usually involves a complex interaction between the individual, the family, the school and contemporaries.

Sources

This account is principally based on data from the series of reports published by the Media Panel, especially the following: Nos. 4, 5, 7b, 13b, 15, 17, 18, 22, 25, 26, 27 and 31 (see appended list).

Parts of this report have been previously published as a section in the report of the Mass Media Committee, "Via Satellite and Cable" (SOU 1984.65). That report also includes several illuminating data on the subject of media structure and media utilisation.

Further reading

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Copies of the above reports are obtainable on request from:

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